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ABSTRACT

The concept of organizational goals, although basic to the study of complex organizations, is no longer analyzed frequently by organizational researchers. The discipline of organizational studies began by concentrating on organizational goals, but by the 1960s researchers had found the concept inadequate as an explanatory variable. They moved to the concept of individual goals but by the 1970s found this approach inadequate, too. They began analyzing organizations as systems. However, the organizational goal concept remains essential for organizational analysis. Mohr has suggested looking at organizational goals as the "collective intent" of an organization's members; collective intent refers to a certain level of agreement reached by an organization's members around particular behaviors. It is recognized, of course, that organizational goals interact with members' personal goals. Discussion of the organizational goal concept is further hampered by terminological problems, the differences between "official" and "real" goals, the problem of goals' "operationality," and the phenomena of goal change, goal displacement (where means become ends), and goal succession (where new goals are set as old ones are attained). The discipline needs to establish the significance of goals, however, to devise methods of discussing how well an organization is doing. (Author/RW)

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Organizations: Normatively Speaking

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Researchers concerned with the analyzing of complex organizations find themselves in the most peculiar position: the concept fundamentally used to define their discipline has been largely ignored in the discipline.

In actuality, considered analysis of the organizational goal concept consists of studies such as the works of Michels (1959), Merton (1963), and Simon 1964). Writers on organizations are normally content to define organization in terms of the goal concept; however, the goal concept has for all practical purposes become a source of embarrassment for organizational researchers. Instinctively, there appears to be a feeling that organizational goals are important; yet that importance has been difficult to determine and document. Even when organizational analysts attempt to defend the value of the concept, that defense invariably is decidely negative. Robert Weiss (1956) exemplifies this point:

> We will find no organization without goals, but it is of interest to speculate on what such a social form might be like. Franz Kafka's inventions probably capture the essential elements; an organization which strives for nothing, where there is no reason for one activity to be preferred to another, except perhaps tradition. The total effect is of unbearable pointlessness.

Weiss' comment is not an explanation of what can be done with the organizational goal concept; rather, it is an explanation as to why we cannot do without it.

It would appear that the conceptual analysis of organizational goals has not progress d far beyond such efforts as Merton's (1963) observations on displacement of goals, Selznick's (1966) work on goal modification, and Sills' assessment of goal succession. As a result, the significance of organizational goals remains a mystery in organizational analysis. Prior to the mid-1950's it is evident that the general consensus of researchers in the field appeared to be that goals defined

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the organization and constituted the dominant variable for the understanding of organizational interaction. It was thought that an organization was a form of social grouping established in a more or less deliberate or purposive manner for the attainment of a specific goal.

By the 1960's, however, the inadequacy of the goal concept as an explanatory variable became apparent. Not only was it difficult to isolate organizational goals, but the very attempt appeared to lead to reification of the concept. Consequently, researchers began to minimize the notion of organizational goals, emphasizing instead the goals of individuals in the organization. The critical component became human behavior within the organization, and the key question came to be centered on the individual, his motives and his actions (Argyris, 1957, 1960, 1964).

However, individual goals and motives proved no less malleable than the concept of organizational goal. Subsequently, both the classical and the human behavior perspectives were subordinated as the organization came to be viewed as a system. Analyzing the organization as a system changed the focus from goals – whether organizational or individual – to inputs, outputs, and feedback. By the 1970's, few studies were taking goals as their point of departure or using the goal concept as a significant variable.

Organizational goals – whether stated or unstated – have frequently been found to be vague, ill-defined, contradictory, multiple and uncategorized as to priority; even when stated explicitly they tend to be intangible, providing little guidance as to the means for their attainment. Frequently, goals appear to be largely unrelated to organizational behavior, with much behavior within organizations not clearly goal-directed (Cohen, 1972).

In examining virtually any work on organization which attempts to define the term 'organization', and the probability is high that the definition – explicitly or implicitly – will emphasize the concept of goal. But the probability is equally high that very little attention will be devoted to the concept thereafter, except in the most general and cursory manner (Blau, 1962). The concept is elusive, its definition difficult, and its prior use as an explanatory variable in the analysis of organization disappointing.

In an article on the concept of organizational goal, Mohr (1973) examines the definition and usage of the concept in the literature and concludes that the concept is essential to the study of organizations. However, the article is far too brief to do much more than superficially inventory major pronouncements on goals and to suggest a method of looking at organizational goals. Yet, given the paucity of efforts in this field, the article by Mohr stands as a significant re-evaluation of the utility of the organizational goal concept.

Fundamentally in the analysis of organizational goals, we are concerned with four fundamental questions:

(1) Do organizations have goals, and how important are goals to the organization?

(2) How and to what extent do goals affect the basic structures and processes of the organization?

(3) How and to what extent do organizations attempt to realize their goals?

(4) To what extent are organizations successful in attaining their goals?

In an attempt to achieve conceptual clarity and scientific precision, the researcher often reaches a point where the concept becomes a vacuity, which is summarily discarded because it tells us nothing of the real world (Yuchtman, 1967).

Mohr chooses to move from a focus on organizational goal to a definition of program goal, except that the latter appears to symbolize a more concrete phenomenon, as March and Simon (1958) demonstrate. Yet the substitution by Mohr does present problems, for organization is generally seen as more complex than program, with the former concept connoting the idea of a multiplicity of programs. If organization is conceived as consisting of multiple programs, then to say – as Mohr (1973) suggests – that the organization may be viewed as '. . . a program containing several other programs . . . .' is to cloud the issue considerably.

The Concept of Collective Intent

There is an extensive body of organizational research which indicates that neither the intentions nor the behavior of organizational parrticipants is invariably oriented toward organizational goals. In a study of how top administrators spend their time at work, Burns concludes that there is a general tendency to over-estimate the proportion of time spent on clearly defined or 'important' subjects, and to underestimate time consumed by personal matters, general management policy discussions, and the like. He states that this

> . . . may indicate either the deflection of managers from the central tasks of management by the emergencies of problems concerning people and by time - consuming discussions of future uncertainties, or it may reveal genuine misconceptions of the direction of management effort. (Vroom, 1967)

In a scathing attack on the concept oforganizational goal, Petro Georgiou (1973) argues that structures, processes and behaviors in organizations cannot be given meaning by recourse to organizational goals; rather, the organization is simply a marketplace in which the form of structures and processes results from a complex incentive system in which individuals contribute their activities to organizations in return for incentives satisfying diverse personal ends.

By collective intent, Mohr means essentially a 'consensus of Intent'. For Mohr, 'consensus' is seen as connoting a centain unanimity, but certainly not

> . . . enthusiasm, spontaneous selection, top priority or exclusive preoccupation. Consensus means explicit or tacit agreement among those concerned that a certain behavior will under the circumstances be followed, notwithstanding the possibility that some might prefer other alternatives. (Mohr, 1973)

In Mohr's conception of consensus of intent, therefore, consensus does require a 'certain' unanimity among organizational members. An organizational goal simply denotes the presence of a given level of agreement that certain behavior is to be expected during the performance of a role in pursuit of a specific state of affairs.

While Herbert Simon's view of the organizational goal concept is considerably different from that of Mohr, Simon implicitly lends support to Mohr's conception of collective intent. Simon writes of goals as being subdivided into 'personal and role-defined goals'; the former is significant in organizations, while the latter defines organizational behavior appropriate to the individual's role in the organization. Simon admits that this is an abstraction from the complexities of real life and does not take account of such factors as the personal desire for power and advancement, which represent an intrusion of personal goals upon organizational role. But he adds:

> To say that the abstraction is sometimes untenable is not to deny that there may be many situations in which it is highly useful. There are, first of all, many organizational decisions that simply do not affect personal motives at all – where organizational goals and personal goals are orthogonal . . . . (Simon, 1964)

And further, Simon points out that the

> . . . ability of a single individual to shift from one role to another as a function of the (organization) environment

> in which he finds himself thus helps explain the extent to which organizational goals become internalized, that is, are automatically evoked and applied during performance of the role. By whatever means the indivudual was originally motivated to adopt the role in the first place, the goals and constraints appropriate to the role become a part of the decisionmaking program, stored in his memory, that defines his role behavior. (Simon, 1964)

The implication of Simon's remarks is that whatever the specific needs and desires of the organizational member, the roles influenced by the organizational goal will require some types of behavior which the member will be expected to fulfill, if he chooses to remain a member.

Scholars attempting to work with the organizational goal concept have been plagued by enormous terminological difficulties. The result has been little short of semantic chaos, born out by the myriad of labels developed to characterize the concept of organizational goal: mission, purpose, end, objective, formal goal, official goal, target goal, program goal, operational goal, operative goal, subgoal, among others. Curiously enough, terminological confusion appears too on organization, for many of these studies find it necessary to redefine the concept of organizational goal. In a book by Hodge and Johnson on management and organizational behavior which substitutes for organizational goal the concept of 'mission', buttressed by the satellite concepts of 'objectives', 'group objectives', and 'work objectives':

> A mission is a complex of objectives, limitations, and standards underlying the production and distribution of utility . . . Every mission should stipulate objectives relating both to membership and work requirements . . . .
>
> Objectives are desired results. It is the function of an objective to offer justification and direction for organization activity . . . .
>
> . . . .group objectives are the stated needs or wants of each of the consumer groups of the organization. . . .
>
> . . .work or project-oriented objectives are the desired results or output of the work performed in a given

> project or program; they are derived from group or membership objectives. (Hodges and Johnson, 1970)

Official goals, whether goals for the organization or goals of the organization, may have a significant role. Referring to such goals as 'ultimate goals', Warner and Havens (1967) indicate that these tend to be intangible, such as helping people become better citizens, developing greater community integration or stronger community spirit, or increasing the dignity of human life. While Warner and Havens note that such goals tend to be abstract statements of purpose rather than unequivocal guides for action, they view official, intangible goals as important nonetheless:

> The intangibility of organizational goals has a number of advantages .... For example, the intangibility of goals makes it possible for the organization to accommodate diverse and even inconsistent subgoals. The program can be 'all things to all people' at an abstract level .... Intangible goals also facilitate flexibility and adaptation. Since organizations cannot foresee all possible contingencies, they need flexibility. (Warner and Havens, 1967)

In writing on organizational goals, many observers equate official goals with vague, intangible and idealistic statements divorced from the activities of the organization.

These, it is presumed, are merely espoused by organizational leaders, legislators and others to project a favorable image. They are designed only for public consumption as a means of legitimating the organization's esistence.

In this criticism of official goals, examples of noble objectives abound: 'promotion of the general welfare', equal justice for all', 'quality education', and a host of others. Official goals as promulgated by leaders – either within or outside the organization – are simply good advertising. The 'real' goals of the organization – those that actually impact upon its operations – are informal and unspoken, and evolve not from external sources, but from the internal dynamics of the organization.

On the matter of operationality of goals, it is useful to analyze what Charles Perrow denotes by the phrase 'operative goals'. For Perrow, operative goals

> . . .designate the ends sought through the actual operating policies of the organization; they tell us what the organization actually is trying to do, regardless of what the official goals say are the aims. (Perrow, 1961)

It should be emphasized that Perrow's explanation of operative goals is not a definition of organizational goal as we have used it. Perrow focuses on the ends sought by the actual 'behavior' of the organization rather than on a collective intent to seek certain ends. While behavior and intent can be expected to be closely linked, this need not necessarily be the case.

In their discussion of operationality of goals, March and Simon lean heavily on the concept of subgoals. They write that the

> . . .'goal of promoting the general welfare' is frequently a part of the definition of the situation in governmental policy–making. It is a non-operational goal because it does not provide . . . a measuring rod for comparing alternative policies, but can only be related to specific actions through the intervention of subgoals. These subgoals, whose connection with the broader 'general welfare' goal is postulated but not testable, become the operational goals in the actual choice situation. (March and Simon, 1958)

This phenomenon which March and Simon describe often leads authors to speak of means – ends analysis or a 'hierarchy of ends'. Simon writes that the fact

> . . . that goals may be dependent for their force on other more distant ends leads to the arrangement of these goals in a hierarchy – each level to be considered as an end relative to the levels below it and as a means relative to the levels above it. (Simon, 1965)

There is little question but that the process of goal change has held a particular fascination for scholars in the field of organizational analysis. Seldom is the concept of organizational goals discussed without at least a passing reference to those two ubiquitous phrases in the literature, 'goal displacement' and 'goal succession'. Perrow observes with respect to 'goal displacement' that it is

' . . .probably the most widely noted characteristic of organizational behavior.' (Perrow, 1961)

In what may well be the most widely quoted statement in the literature of organizational analysis, Robert Merton defines goal displacement as a phenomenon in which adherence

> . . .to the rules, orginally conceived as a means, becomes transformed into an end–in–itself; there occurs the familiar process of displacement of goals whereby 'an instrumental value becomes a terminal value.' Discipline, readily interpreted as conformance with regulations, whatever the situation, is seen not as a measure designed for specific purposes but becomes an immediate value in the life - organization of the bureaucrat. This emphasis, resulting from the displacement of the original goals, develops into rigidities and an inability to adjust readily. (Merton, 1967)

While goal displacement is often seen, to use Etzioni's description, as a phenomenon whereby the organization '. . .substitutes for its legitimate goal some other goal for which it was not created, for which resources were not allocated to it, and which it is not known to serve,' (Etzioni, 1964) the concept of goal succession appears to carry a greater degree of legitimacy. Blau defines goal succession as a process whereby '. . .as earlier objectives are attained, they become stepping stones for new ones.' (Blau, 1956) Through various other authors see goal succession as the '. . .tendency of organizations to find new goals when the old ones have been realized or cannot be attained,' (Etzioni, 1964) the use of this latter definition creates a potentially significant area of confusion between the concepts of displacement and succession. For how does one, in a case where the organization has been unable to attain its goal and consequently abandons it, determine whether goal displacement or succession has occurred? To question how well organizations are doing means that one must inquire as to the organization's goals particularly transitive goals. Try as critical scholars might, they

have been unable to devise methods of discussing 'how well an organization is doing' without resorting to the use of goals or to language which is reasonably synonymous to that of goals. A concerted effort within the discipline to establish the significance of organizational goals – particularly transitive goals – in the life of organizations appears to be long overdue.

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